

# Stolen Thunder: Storms in Latin Literature

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In Latin literature, would-be heroes, leaders and fame-seekers have to weather storms and battle through high seas. The 'storm-tossed' epic champion only becomes a real man by doing battle with nature and surviving (facing death at sea is the ultimate extreme sport, as a body lost to the waves cannot be buried in a grave, the function of which is to construct and perpetuate the hero's fame). The storm is nature's temper tantrum, a pyrotechnic carnival of irrational, chaotic and hellish forces, a literary drama with distinctive acts and stunning light and sound effects. It may be a commonplace literary 'device', and a standard rhetorical exercise in Roman schools, but the poetic storm churns up a complex mass of metaphors and associations used differently by each new author and text.

From Homer onwards, storms come to embody the massive scale and scope, as well as the violence, impact and creative energy of epic. The storm is often a metaphor for war in poetry, especially conflict within the family (the competing winds are savage brothers each hell-bent on mastery of the sky) – and conversely storms are commonly evoked in militaristic language. Spiritual and emotional turmoil makes for heavy weather, too: Roman elegy rides on (Venus') waves of passion, and tragedy's retributions are cast from blackened skies.

## Taking worlds by storm

Virgil's *Aeneid* is set in motion by Juno's storm (her wrath externalised) in Book 1, which leaves Aeneas battered and victimised. The scene evokes the storm in Book 5 of the *Odyssey*, yet Virgil has innovated by putting the storm first. At the centre of the epic, in Book 7, the anti-hero Turnus is roused to battle by the fury Allecto in terms that recall the opening tempest, while the war in Latium builds up storm imagery (most elaborately in the fight between Aeneas and the monstrous Mezentius in book 10). Aeneas has, it seems, come to embody the force of the tempest that winded him back in Book 1. In the final book, then, our hero, once battered by divine-sent storms, now adopts the power of Jupiter to lay Turnus low. His spear whips through the air like a black whirlwind or lightning bolt to pierce Turnus' thigh in book 12, and the phrase 'his limbs are loosened by cold', used of the storm-lashed Aeneas in book 1, is now applied to Turnus at the end, as his butchered body slackens in death's chill.

The *Aeneid* can be read as the tale of how the Trojans endure the storms of fate and gradually win back control over the weather. In book 2, the fall of Troy is compared to the destruction wrought by an almighty flood. The poem has been seen by many to allegorise the history of Rome as the assertion of Olympian order over the forces of cosmic chaos. So the storm winds, for example those released from Aeolus' cave in book 1, look much like the Titans, those devilish giants who according to myth attempted to attack the heavens and bring down the Olympian gods. These violent forces muscling their way out of underground prisons come to be embodied, at various points, by the Trojans' enemies (Mezentius in book 10, who is as tall as Orion, the constellation thought to signal an encroaching storm, is a good example), while the Trojans, and the Romans, tend to be allied in the text with storm-battling gods. So in the very first

simile of the poem, Neptune quelling Juno's storm is compared to a Roman statesman calming an angry mob; this image is recalled in book 10, where the discontent of the gods in council rumbles like a rising storm, only to be silenced by the diplomatic Jupiter.

An interesting parallel comes from the visual arts, where Augustus (the emperor under whom Virgil composed the *Aeneid*) is sometimes depicted as Neptune driving his chariot over the waves, alluding to his great victory at Actium in 31 BC. Indeed, the theme of the king's control of the forces of nature is a very old theme in Roman thought, which regained popularity in the propaganda battles of the late Republic; from there, it was often incorporated into later Roman imperial mythology.

## Lightning reactions

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* begins with primordial chaos and the primal god's creation of the universe, which mirror key elements of the poetic storm (disorder, darkness, the fusion of air and water, heaven and hell). When iron-age man invented the arts of deception and began to discipline the sea with ships, Jupiter set out to destroy the human race with a flood. This circular regurgitation of chaos, in contrast to the *Aeneid*'s sense of progression towards a Roman management of nature, sets the pattern for the whole poem. In the *Metamorphoses*, storms often work as triggers for violent metamorphosis – and in a sense, they come to represent the very destructive chaos that is metamorphosis itself.

The best example of this is perhaps the famous storm scene starring Ceyx in book 11. This storm looks back to the primal cosmic chaos of the early parts of the poem, but strives to even greater excesses. It sends us spinning back to the beginning of book 1, and the story of how giants piled the huge mountains, Pelion and Ossa, on top of one another to reach the stars: when Ceyx' ship is wrecked, *you'd think that the heavens were falling into the sea*. Meanwhile, the storm-as-war metaphor developed in Virgil is rendered more graphic and hyperbolic: waves crash onto the boat like a battering ram into a fortress, we read; the tenth wave penetrates the hull like the first soldier to leap over the walls of a besieged city; and one last wave sinks the vessel, like a victor gloating in his spoils.

## Power cuts

So Ovidian storms symbolise the violent, transformative powers of metamorphosis itself, and thus of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's poetic project. Yet crucially, they also represent a threat to Ovidian artistry, and to the poet's playful depiction of himself as a less-than-manly man. Storms sink reputations, shatter egos, and bellow over human voices: they spell profound danger for weak mortals. Man's invention of the technology of sailing, on the other hand, exemplifies his potential for deception, and so losing control of your ship in a storm is tantamount to artistic impotence, especially for the self-styled trickster Ovid. This idea is exploited at length in his exile poetry, especially the first of the *Tristia* or 'sad poems', which repeatedly uses the image of the poem as a vessel at sea. Here Ovid claims that exile has

blunted his artistic powers, and his plea to Augustus amid the storm ('let your powers favour my little boat') conceals a reference to the *Art of love*, the work partly responsible for Ovid's banishment, which plays continually on the image of the poem as ship and the poet as helmsman. Augustus, who plays the angry Jupiter in *Tristia* 1, is being asked to calm the storm, and to give Ovid's poetry the benefit of the doubt.

After the *Art of love*, power cuts caused by stormy weather are also often presented as sexual. The castrating force of the storm is most explicit in Juvenal's mock-epic storm spoof in *Satire* 12: Juvenal's 'friend' has narrowly escaped death by shipwreck, during which he was forced to jettison his luxury cargo, just as an otter is prepared to lose one testicle in his struggle to escape a hunter's trap. We might compare the narcissistic Leander in the 18th of Ovid's *Heroides*, or 'letters from the heroines', who is metaphorically rendered impotent by his immersion into the Hellespont, the stormy waters of which are themselves a symbolic manifestation of Hero's passion. And indeed in his elegiac love poems, Ovid ever portrays his paranoia about writing on the shoreline, as he puts it, rather than battling it out on high literary seas, about catching the sharp end of the storm rather than rising above it. These playful inversions of the Virgilian model of heroism present the poet as operating very different codes of genre and masculinity, as sailing proudly against the wind.

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